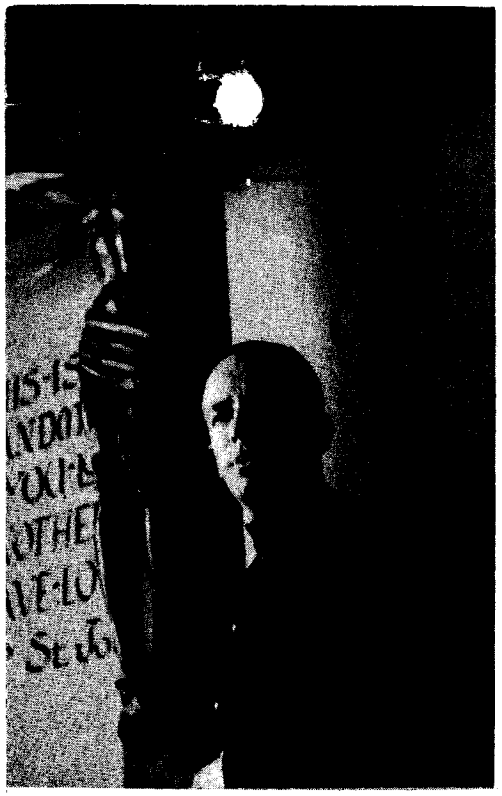


As Brother Marinus, he is doing "what the Man at the Helm wants me to do."

God's Skipper

by THEODORE IRWIN

Captain La Rue, who saved 14,000 refugees from a Korean Hell, finds his own salvation as a monk

FOUR DAYS before last Christmas, in the Korean Embassy in Washington, U.S. Navy brass, members of the Maritime Board, the Chairman of the Board of the Moore-McCormack Lines, high officials of the Roman Catholic Church and other prominent people gathered to honor an act of heroism performed five years before at that very hour.

An Embassy aide read the glowing citation:

"In recognition and appreciation of his outstanding and exceptionally meritorious service . . . rescue of 14,000 refugees . . . a humanitarian mission remembered by the people of Korea as an inspiring example of Christian faith in action..."

Then Ambassador Yon Chan Yang pinned the Korean Order of Military Merit Ulchi with Gold Star on the breast of Brother Marinus, a tall, lean Benedictine monk.

His feat had been fantastic enough in itself. But it was made even more incredible by the fact that this gentle religious had been Captain Leonard P. La Rue, skipper of the cargo ship *Meredith Victory*, when he performed it. For this was the man who wrote maritime history in the face of almost certain death during the hellish siege of Hungnam in 1950. Then five years later, after 15 years at sea, the 40-year-old skipper laid aside his charts and sextant to don the black habit of a monk, dedicating the rest of his life to prayer and menial labor at St. Paul's Abbey near Newton, New Jersey.

What made this veteran mariner heed a call stronger than that of the sea?

"The call came," he says, "after a serious operation at an Army hospital in Tokyo in the fall of 1954. On my hospital bed, in the early hours of the morning, I reflected about those throughout the world who were also suffering and I thought of Christ on the cross and what He went through for us.

"Then I asked myself, 'Am I doing what the Man at the Helm wants me to do?' I saw again those people packed like sheep on the decks and in the holds, I felt I was chosen to be their shepherd. It must have been God's will. . . ."

Captain La Rue's fantastic rescue feat at Hungnam began on the evening of December 21, 1950, when his ship, the *Meredith Victory*, a Moore-McCormack freighter chartered to the Military Sea Transportation Service, entered the harbor with its cargo. The city was a shambles, with half of it in flames and a black pall of smoke hanging overhead.

U. N. forces were trying to head off the Communist hordes in the surrounding hills, our fleet was blasting away with all its guns, our planes strafing and dropping Napalm bombs, and Hungnam was crowded with panic-stricken refugees who had fled before the Chinese thrust from the Yalu River. It was like a scene out of Dante's Inferno.

When the *Meredith Victory* docked, five haggard Army colonels boarded her. "Captain La Rue, we need your help," they told him. "We have 35,000 South Koreans who have to get out of here as quickly as possible. We hear the Reds have sworn to behead any they find in the city. No one knows when the zero hour will come. What do you say?"

Unhesitatingly, the skipper replied, "Of course." But as he saw the crowds waiting on the waterfront in the bitter cold, he felt that the question had been answered almost 20 centuries before with the words: "Whatsoever you do to the least of these, you do unto me."

His ship, with facilities for 12 passengers, was registered at 7,607-gross-ton capacity and at the time carried a heavy load of cargo.

"When you've had enough passengers give us the word and that'll be it," he was told, and with two GIs at the gangplank counting, the refugees began coming aboard.

First came the aged and infirm, the women and children, placed on wooden pallets that were hoisted up by the ship's winches. Men used makeshift elevators or climbed aboard. Many carried precious belongings—a sewing machine, live fowl, musical instruments. Ten thousand people were jammed under the hatches and still they swarmed aboard until they crammed the decks.

At 11:30 the next morning, the skipper called a halt. People were

The Captain, in the role he renounced.

packed so closely it seemed they would find it hard to breathe.

The *Meredith Victory* weighed anchor and headed for Pusan with an official count of 14,000 Koreans, plus a crew of 35. Within the next 24 hours, the count was increased by five babies who were born with La Rue and Chief Mate Dino Sevastio acting as midwives.

The voyage proved an unforgettable nightmare. There was little food or water on the ship, no doctor, no interpreter. The passengers grew panicky when a rumor spread that they were to be taken out to sea and dumped. The ship had to pass through a 30-mile mine field and there was always the danger that a mine would suddenly blow up the great human cargo

The first two days and nights, the skipper didn't sleep at all.

"Navigating the ship," Brother Marinus says, "I felt like an instrument of Almighty God. On that voyage, I suppose I was God's Skipper."

Four days later, on Christmas day, the *Meredith Victory* put in at Pusan where the passengers were transferred to two LSTs tied alongside in the harbor.

To Captain La Rue, the meaning of the episode was clear and simple: it was not that the *Meredith Victory* had transported probably the largest human cargo ever carried by any ship. What was important was that he'd been given a chance to apply the Golden Rule.

Yet this did not precipitate his decision to swallow the anchor and seek the cloistered life of a monastery.

"Your vocation doesn't come suddenly," he says.

It took a long time for Leonard La Rue to find his true vocation. Born in Philadelphia, he was the youngest of five children. His mother was an American of Irish descent and his father a French-Canadian instrument-maker at the Frankford Arsenal in Philadelphia.

Skinny and serious-minded as a youth, Leonard worshipped what he calls the "real heroes"—the saints. At 18, after high school, he took a two-year course at the Pennsylvania State Nautical School, received his license as a cadet and then took a job as a quartermaster.

Working his way up through the grades with several steamship companies, La Rue was given his first

command in 1[illegible]. In World War II, he ran convoys across the Atlantic, delivered lend-lease materiel in the Mediterranean and on the terrifying, submarine-infested Murmansk run. It took a tough man to pilot that Murmansk trip.

As a skipper, Captain La Rue had the reputation of being "easy" on his men, firm but even-tempered. He tried to make his ship as homelike as possible, and had a crucifix over his bunk. "As a skipper goes, so goes a ship," he believed, but admits that his life wasn't perfect.

He loved the sea, though throughout his career he often got miserably seasick—something none of his men ever guessed. What held him was a powerful "travel bug" that bit him as a teen-ager when he heard tall tales of far-off places.

As a kid, he smoked cigarette butts he picked up on the streets of Philadelphia but as a mariner he rarely touched tobacco, possibly because of his seasickness.

"I never had a stomach for hard liquor. It never agreed [illegible]h me," he says, "though I do like wine and beer.

"And I never kept company, never even came near to marriage. I was never long enough in one place to get to know a woman well. And I felt it would be unfair to any woman I married if I were to be away from her so long."

In 1946, one of Captain La Rue's passengers was an old Benedictine priest, Dom Laundenschlager, who was returning from Trinidad to his home in Bahia, Brazil. During the two-week voyage, La Rue became devoted to him.

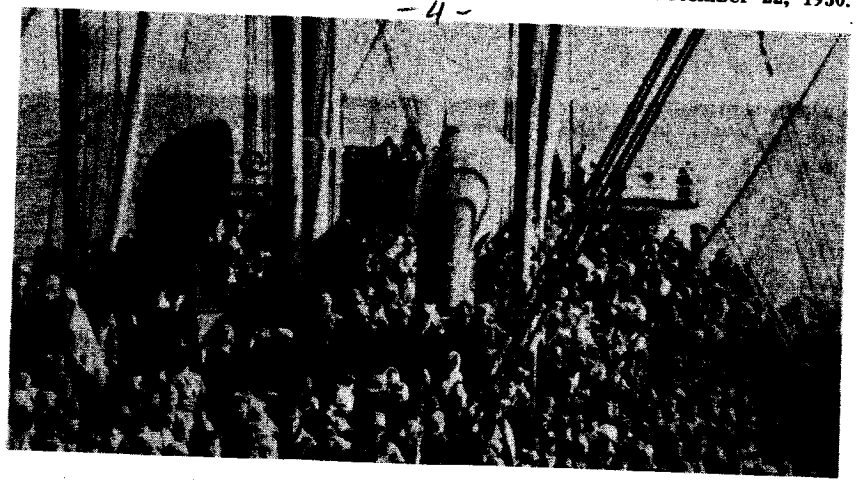
As the cleric walked to the gangplank at Bahia, he turned to La Rue and said prophetically, "This, my son, is no vocation for you."

The remark stuck in the back of the skipper's mind for years.

"A man at sea has plenty of time to think," he explains. "He gets down to basic things."

Thus the sum of his experiences led Captain La Rue, that morning in a Tokyo hospital, to ask for the

Loaded with cargo and packed with 14,000 terror-stricken Koreans, La Rue's tiny freighter snaked its way out of Hungnam Harbor on December 22, 1950.



chaplain. After he had obtained and read the literature on various monastic orders, the skipper applied for a six-months' vacation.

On Thanksgiving Day, 1954, he entered St. Paul's Abbey. The name he chose, Marinus, has no link with the sea; the first four letters are "in honor of the blessed Mother of God."

The moment he dropped anchor at the Abbey that Thanksgiving Day, he felt that he had shed all his past. "I experienced a great happiness, as if God had sent me his cross."

His letter of resignation to the Moore-McCormack Lines said:

"My stay in the hospital proved to be climactic in that it resolved me upon a course of action to settle two absorbing questions: 1. What is the real purpose of life? 2. What am I doing about it? Going to sea had many facets which were enjoyable but each of us in his own manner must walk the Road into Eternity alone and I feel certain that for me the Road stretches from here onward . . ."

Today at St. Paul's Abbey, a cluster of low stone buildings on 550 acres of farmland, Brother Marinus spends his days in prayer, meditation and a variety of chores. The Benedictine motto is "*Ora et labora*"—prayer and work—and Brother Marinus' assignment in the refectory is to set the tables and wash the dishes for the 40 men in the monastery.

Mornings, he hits the deck at 4:30, except for one week out of four when he is up at 3:30 to prepare breakfast. Once every two weeks, he may leave the grounds for a couple of hours, which he spends taking a walk.

St. Paul's includes a seminary, high school, retreat house, nursery and greenhouse, but its chief function is devoted to missionary work. "We offer up our work as a prayer," says Brother Marinus. "Our prayers help the missionaries in the active life, converting people all over the world."

Listening to him talk about his new vocation, you see his finely chiseled, sensitive face become radiant. And you see that God's Skipper has at last come home.